

Wrapping up the Christmas Season: Looking back at holiday magic, a surprise “Ave Maria,” a joyful engagement, and a new grandbaby



“Mankind is a great, an immense family... This is proved by what we feel in our hearts at Christmas.” —Pope John XXIII

The Close of the Christmas Season:

The weeks leading up to Christmas are usually busy, sometimes stressful and overwhelming, and often sentimental for families. Those with growing children can find their days and nights filled with holiday activities and special school events.

But in the true sense of the liturgical calendar, the actual Christmas Season is less than three weeks: Starting with the first Vigil Mass on Christmas Eve, continuing through the 12 days of Christmas, including the Solemnity of the Epiphany of our Lord, and ending today on the Feast of the Baptism of The Lord.

Usually the fast-pace of the weeks leading up to Christmas Day then slows down and families spend some quiet time together after the 25th. My students at John Carroll came back to school this past Monday, January 6, and shared a lot about how they spent their time off. We had semester exams on December 17, 18, and 19, so we were blessed with a 18-day respite from classes and academia.

Many students shared with me about holiday parties and get-togethers with relatives

and friends. Some of them travelled for vacation fun, while others travelled to visit grandparents and extended family. There are always a few young people who speak about being bored... I wish I could help them realize how important it is to make every minute, every day count. Never waste your time being bored!!

Christmas Eve:

“God walked down the stairs of heaven with a Baby in His arms.”

—Paul Scherer (1892-1969)

Probably my most favorite day of the year, this past Christmas Eve was especially filled with many magical moments.

For the past fourteen years, my Campus Ministry Office has hosted Christmas Eve Mass in the John Carroll gym. I wrote about the evolution of this celebration back in December in my Countdown to Christmas.



Photo by Patti Murphy Dohn

I spent the evening of December 23 at school setting up the altar area and getting everything ready for our 4:30 Vigil Mass the next day.

Once again, as in each of the past years, we had a packed house. As I shared last month, going to Christmas Eve Mass in a gym is definitely not the same as being in a church with all the liturgical adornments of the season. It is truly the gathering of people that matters most. And we again this year had a beautiful celebration of the Nativity. Father Steve Sutton, associate pastor of St. Ignatius Church, Hickory, and my colleague in the JC Religion Department, was the celebrant.

One of the my personal magical moments came after Holy Communion when my son Joseph, 27, a member of the JC Class of 2005, surprised me by singing the “Ave Maria.” He had made arrangements with our dear friend and JC alumni parent Cathy Seufert who conducts the Children’s Choir for St. Ignatius. Cathy’s choir children

sang before Mass as the crowds were gathering. Joseph had met up with her to practice the day before. A longtime actor, singer, and dancer in community theatre, Joseph has a degree in performing arts and has classical training in voice. His “Ave Maria” was a highlight for me and brought tears to the eyes of many of us gathered in the gym.

Enjoy Joseph’s “Ave Maria”

Christmas Eve Dinner at Scotto’s Cafe:

After Mass we always go to dinner each year as a family to Scotto’s Cafe, a delightful, favorite Italian restaurant near our home in Bel Air. We have enjoyed our special Christmas Eve dinners out each year since George and I were married in 2003. Whomever is available joins us. This year we had our very expectant daughter Meighan-whose baby girl is due on January 15-and her husband Jeff, Joseph, Katie and her boyfriend Karl, and Karl’s Mom, Cecelia. It was crowded, as usual, and we stopped at their bar for wine and festive conversations with some of our friends who were gathered there.

After we were seated and placed our orders, guess who walked in?

None other than Santa Claus!! Making his way through the dining room, Santa happily jingled his bells and smiled for photos, including one with our daughter Katie, before he got on his way for his busiest night of the year!!



Photo by Patti Murphy Dohn

Soon our dinners arrived and everyone got their meals except our daughter Katie. After our server told us to enjoy our dinners and that she would be back shortly to

see if we needed anything else, Karl expressed concern that Katie's dinner had not yet arrived. She assured him that she was fine, certain that her food was on its way, just as I was telling her to grab her fork and dive into mine with me.

Karl was insistent that he would find out what was the delay, and quickly got up and left to check in. Did he go to the kitchen? We were all wondering... Katie was a little flustered by his departure. Within three minutes, George said, "Here comes Karl." Looking over toward the middle dining area, here comes Karl carrying Katie's dinner. Placing her plate on the table in front of Katie, Karl smiled broadly as we all saw the open box on the side of the plate prominently displaying the most beautiful diamond ring!!



Photo by Patti Murphy Dohn

Katie was crying, we were all cheering and clapping. Joseph jumped up and started videoing on his iPhone, and the silence that overcame the rest of the restaurant as everyone else looked over to see what the fuss was about erupted into more clapping, cheering, and much pinging on water glasses with utensils for the newly engaged couple to kiss.

It was the most magical moment. Looking back, I am so overwhelmed with gratitude that Karl allowed this most special moment to take place right there before our family and his Mom. Katie was weeping with joy and could hardly speak as he slipped the ring on her finger and she admired its beauty through her tears. Our dinner was filled with lots of wedding talk and afterwards, when we were leaving, many people came over to wish Katie and Karl their very best for much future happiness. It was truly magical.

We went back to our house for gift exchanges and dessert. I found out later at home that Karl had called George the day before and gotten his blessing for this Christmas Eve dinner proposal. I was again thrilled that Karl had included us in this special

moment, and also that George had not told me. I was truly overjoyed by the surprise as it unfolded there at Scotto's.



The Happy Engaged Couple (Photo by Patti Murphy Dohn)

“The best of all gifts around any Christmas tree: the presence of a happy family all wrapped up in each other.”